WOMEN AS VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE: AN ANALYSIS OF DIRECT AND INDIRECT TECHNIQUES OF BLAMING THE VICTIM USED IN ROMANIAN ONLINE MEDIA

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Abstract*: The present work brings to attention the way Romanian online media presented cases of intimate femicide committed in the interval 2010-2015. In the category of intimate femicide there were included all the homicides committed with intention on women by the current or former partner (husbands, lovers, concubines). In the analyzed period in Romanian online media were presented 184 cases of intimate femicide in N=2282 articles. On an average, each case of intimate femicide was presented in 12.4 articles. In order to emphasize the manner Romanian journalists described the victims and the aggressors, but also to identify the presence/absence of the direct and indirect techniques pointed out by Taylor in the case of the American journalists, I decided to select the most promoted 10 cases of intimate femicide. These cases were presented on average in 49 articles (38-59 articles). The 490 articles were published in the national, regional or local online media, as well as on aggregated news sites or websites of television channels. The analysis emphasized the fact that the Romanian journalists use direct and indirect techniques to disfavor the victims identified by Taylor. As a consequence, we can impose an awareness campaign for the journalists concerning the consequences that might have the way of promoting acts of violence against women. It is necessary to elaborate a good practices guide as it happens in the USA, the UK or Canada.*

Keywords*: intimate femicide, direct and indirect techniques of blaming victim, online media*

International studies conducted in countries with experience in the domain of preventing acts of violence against women (including femicides) have shown that media can contribute, by the way it presents cases of violence, to maintaining some attitudes that encourage violence (Bullok, Cubert, 2002), blamed the victim and decreased the responsibility of the offender (Taylor, 2009; Fairbarn, Dawson, 2013; Gius, Lalli, 2014; Scolaro, 2014; Mahadeen, 2017) or re-victimised the victim (Bucqueroux, Seymour, 2009; Simpson, Coté, 2006).

In this context, some specialists have formulated general recommendations for mediatisation of the fatal violence against women's cases:

> There should be appropriate reporting of femicide cases with due respect to the victim and her family. News reports should not be overly sympathetic to perpetrators, privileging the perpetrator's story. Women should not be written out of reports – nor should women be defined one-dimensionally by their relationship to men/families (Brenan, 2016:5)

Being aware by the fact that media can influence the public perception (Carll, 2003) and they have an important role in "educating the community about public policy issues that affect public safety" (Bucqueroux, Seymour, 2009: 2), other specialists have chosen to

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develop guidelines for the coverage of violence against women. Journalists from the USA, Canada or the UK being compelled to abide by the rules contained in these guidelines (Bucqueroux and Seymour, 2009; Starr, 2008; Zero Tolerance).

Methodology

The present work brings to attention the way Romanian online media presented cases of intimate femicide committed in the interval 2010-2015. In the category of intimate femicide there were included all the homicides committed with intention on women by the current or former partner (husbands, lovers, concubines). In the analyzed period in Romanian online media were presented 184 cases of intimate femicide in N=2282 articles. On an average, each case of intimate femicide was presented in 12.4 articles.

To identify articles where instances of intimate femicide have been reported, I used Google Chrom and the words "he killed his wife", "he killed his lover/beloved". All articles that were intimately related to femicides committed between Romanian citizens, regardless of their age, were selected. There were included in the database both the cases of intimate femicides committed in Romania and those that occurred in other countries. In order to emphasize the manner Romanian journalists described the victims and the aggressors, but also to identify the presence/absence of the direct and indirect techniques pointed out by Taylor in the case of the American journalists, I decided to select the most promoted 10 cases of intimate femicide. For those cases in the first stage I have selected from the data bases all information regarding the act of violence, victims, offenders and the history of the relations. In the second stage I have identified all articles which had presented the ten cases. These cases were presented on average in 49 articles (38-59 articles). The 490 articles were published in the national, regional or local online media, as well as on aggregated news sites or websites of television channels. Using the selection criterion "the presence of victims' blame techniques" we selected for the discourse analysis only the cases for which we identified the presence of victim blame techniques (6 cases).

Finally, I analyzed the way intimated cases of intimate femicides were based on the types of victim blame identified by Taylor (2009). A study conducted by Taylor (2009) in the USA emphasized the fact that American journalists use a series of direct and indirect techniques by means of which the responsibility of the acts of violence is passed to the victims of intimate femicide. The description of the victims by using negative information, emphasizing the fact that they did not report the acts of violence, presenting information about them being involved in relationships with other men (2009: 33) were direct techniques to blame the victims most frequently pointed out in the cases of the American journalists. On the other hand, Taylor noticed a series of indirect techniques to blame the victims: describing the aggressors as having health problems (mental, physical or emotional) or financial problems, presenting the acts of violence without specifying the role of the aggressor or in such a way as to turn out that the victim and the aggressor equally contributed to the acts of violence (2009: 34)

The present chapter is limited to the analysis of the 10 cases of intimate femicide committed by some current or former partners on Romanian women. Among the selected

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cases there were 8 cases committed in Romania and 3 cases committed abroad among Romanian citizens with immigrant status.

Results

The analysis of the information on the ten selected cases of intimate femicide revealed a number of peculiarities of the way in which these cases were reported. In particular, journalists included information on the act of violence (date and place where the act was committal, modus operandi, number of wounds, location of wounds, weapons used). Thus, according to the data presented by journalists, the vast majority of cases of intimate femicide (8 cases) were committed in Romania, only two cases were committed abroad (France, Portugal and the USA). Six intimate femicides were committed in the urban area and four in the rural area. Nine cases had only one victim, one case had three victims. The vast majority of cases were committed using a knife (5) or an ax (2). Few cases of intimate femicide have been committed by hitting with fingers and feets (3).

Journalists have paid a significant amount of attention only to information on victims and offenderss and have only included some data on actors involved in the violent acts. This time, journalists provided information on all cases only on the age, environment and residence of the victims and the abusers. Data on the level of education (4 victims, 1 offender), the profession (3 victims, 6 aggressors), alcohol consumption (2 victims 4 offenderss) and health status (3 victims, 4 offenderss) were mentioned in few cases.

Direct victim blame techniques

The analysis of the way in which the ten selected intimate femicide cases were mediatised revealed the presence of direct and indirect blame techniques in six cases.The presentation of the victim as being the main guilt for the evolution of the conflict into a murder was the most common technique directly identified in the analyzed cases.

To better illustrate the use of direct blame techniques, we extracted some examples from the articles describing the case of Romanian emigrants in Portugal. The victim was presented as being infidel, alcoholic, conflicting, or wasting her partner's money. Also, the victim was described negatively by association with some actions or with negative terms such as: "the woman tooks he out of his mind", "she was very arrogant", "he wanted to call the ambulance but the wife did not allow him to do so" and that "she spends all the money he earns". The aggressor was described as being "driving crazy" by his wife's actions.

> Ion and Dana Șoma had been married for 14 years and were living for a few years in Portugal where they had gone to work, in order to have a better living. The man says: "we were like Tom and Jerry" it means they fought a lot. He accused her of infidelity, she accused him of spending all the money on alcohol. On Saturday, November 15th, at noon, they started drinking alcohol at home. He drank vodka and she drank beer. They drank a lot as the man remembers. In the context of alcohol consumption they had new arguments. They accused each other of infidelity. The woman drove her husband crazy. Without being aware of his acts, he admits having taken the knife and cut her to pieces. He also asserts in the statement before the coroners that he intended to call the ambulance, but his wife didn't let

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him, as she pretended to have only a sting in the back. Then, he went to bed. As he was drunk, he fell asleep immediately and the following day he woke up and found traces of blood in the entire flat. His wife had died of internal bleeding. (Georgeta Petrovici, The AMAZING story of the man who KILLED his wife in Portugal, then he took her 4,000 km by car to Caransebeș. He fooled the REVENUE OFFICERS that the woman WAS ASLEEP in the back seat of the car, EVZ.ro, 22.11.2014).

On the crime day, on Saturday, at noon, Ion and Dana, his wife, are thought to have consumed alcohol beverages. He drank vodka and she drank beer. He drank about a bottle, she drank about eight and a glass of vodka. One of Dana's old habits as the defendant said. In the context of alcohol consumption they started to have ardent discussions. They accused each other of infidelity. Ion Șoma confessed that his wife and he were like Tom and Jerry. He had repeatedly asked her to get a divorce as he was accusing her of not having a job and spending all the money he had earned. In the context of these reproaches, he flew into a rage and stabbed her with a knife. Only once! Seeing blood traces, he intended to call for the ambulance even if he admits that he had only just stung her a little. The woman would have taken out the phone card to prevent him from calling for the ambulance. She would have opposed as she was very arrogant, term repeatedly used by Șoma. At a certain point he went to bed and being drunk he fell asleep quickly. In the morning he didn't find his wife in bed, as he had expected. He saw traces of blood in the hall and started to look for her. He found her on the ground next to the bed. (Dani Stanciu, The amazing film of the crime in Portugal. Staggering confessions of the murderer 21.11.2014)

Another direct victim blame technique identified by Taylor was the one through which the journalists informed the audience readers that although the victim had been exposed to serious violence in the past, she did not notify the police about that or if she had done so after that she withdrew her complaints. In the case of Romanian journalists we have identified a similar technique, but this time the responsibility was passed to the victim's family. The victim's family filed several complaints that they withdrew them afterwards.

As the girl had been receiving several death threats for the last months, her parents had filed two charges at the police station in Fieni against her former boyfriend. The police officers filed two criminal charges for blows and threats, but, later Cristina's family withdrew the complaints. (PRO TV, A 16 year-old girl was deadly stabbed by her former boyfriend, in front of the house. Her last words were "I love you, mommy", 11.10.2014)

Indirect victim blame techniques

As we have seen in the *Methodology* section, among the indirect victim blaming techniques identified by Taylor were: 1) the representation of the aggressor as a man with health or financial problems and the victim as the responsible for the act of violence, 2) coverage of domestic violence without mentioning the role of the aggressor in these violent acts and 3) using sympathetic language to describe the aggressor (Taylor 2009: 34). These indirect victim blame techniques were also identified during the analysis of intimate femicide cases mediated in online media in Romania. We chose to exemplify one of the most publicized cases of intimate femicide (60 articles) committed between 2010-2015. It is the case of a murder committed in France by a 40 yerars old man. He killed his pregnant wife and two children (one 5 years old and the other 18 months). Although the violent act

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committed by the aggressor was a particularly serious one for which he received a 30-year prison sentence, the Romanian journalists described the aggressor as "the victim" of an "alteration of reason". In support of this representation, the journalists have brought the arguments of two psychiatrists who were "intrigued" by the "incomprehensible act" of a "person without any pathology" in the past. The explanation given by one of the psychiatrists, taken over by the journalists, according to which the aggressor "lost his reason after a wife's statement", which was felt as an "unpardonable" abandon, was also associated with information on family financial problems. In addition, journalists have emphasized the wife's role in triggering violence: it has triggered everything through the frequent debates about money and the reproaches it made on the day of the crime.

> Construction electrician, who seemed to love his children and passed as a model worker, the man became the victim of "temporary insanity", of a temporary psychotic crisis. This was the sentence of the two psychiatrists that examined him, puzzled, at their turn, by the "misunderstood act" of "a subject lacked of any pathology". (France. A Romanian that killed his pregnant wife and children was sentenced to 30 years of prison, 8.07.2017)

> It is possible that the individual, who tried to commit suicide a few days after his crimes, to have lost his reason after one of his wife's assertions, felt as an intolerable "abandon", on the background of frequent arguments due to the financial problems of the couple, exposed his analysis, in front of the court, one of the psychiatrists." (France. A Romanian that killed his pregnant wife and children was sentenced to 30 years of prison, 8.07.2017)

> According to them, the nightmare started after his wife's reproach that was coming from work too late. "If you do the same as you did on Monday, it would be better not to come back at all", she would have said to the Romanian. This warning was resented by the man "as an abandon", that divided him between "two rash liabilities: his work and the love for his family", said one of the psychiatrists in court. Anyone can be submitted to such tensions, but the Romanian electrician, who had frequent arguments with his wife because of the money, felt them in "an extreme manner". (Ileana Toma, A Romanian condemned to 30 years of prison in France after killing his wife and children, News.ro, 8.07.2017).

Another indirect victim blame technique identified in the Romanian media was the association of the information about the aggressor's health with the excessive jealousy he expresses against the victim. The type of sick and jealous aggressor is found even in the case of intimate femicides committed with cruelty: "the monster who has beheaded his ex-girlfriend" and the young "driven crazy of jealousy" who set his lover into fire. Both aggressors are described as overly jealous. But one of them was medical retired and jealous, and the other was jealous and became sick when he was abandoned by his girlfriend.

> The problems between the two people started because of the excessive jealousy of the man who was on the disability pension. (Ana Oleinic, Exposure about the monster that beheaded his former girlfriend. It could be the case of a first degree murder, BZI.ro, 1.11.2013).

> He couldn't bear seeing his girlfriend talking with another person and was jealous even on her daughters from her previous marriage. "He didn't allow her to help them with their homework or to buy them presents. On Christmas, for example, he became jealous when the girls received gifts and made a scene. When my sister ran away from his home, she only

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> took the Christmas tree and some balls and she told us that finally, after so many years, she will have peaceful holidays", confessed her sister GabrieleiPuricoi."(Ana Oleinic, Exposure about the monster that beheaded his former girlfriend. It could be the case of a first degree murder, BZI.ro, 1.11.2013).

In the case of the young footballer the jealousy is the expression of love he had for three years for his girlfriend. Consequently, the act of violence is explained by strong feelings that the aggressor had for young teenage of 16 years old. Everything takes the form of a love story in which the aggressor "driven crazy by jealousy" wanted to kill her lover, and then commit suicide, "to be both the bridegroom and the bride in heaven."

> A 23 year-old young man blacked out when his girlfriend said that she was leaving him. Insanely jealous, he had one thought: to kill her! (Nicoleta Livezeanu, *Burned alive by the dumped boyfriend*, 30.04. 2013)

> People can't recover the shock and say the young man became mad at the thought that the girl he had been obsessively in love with for the last three years would leave him for another boy. According to the relatives, the suspect, now remanded, would have had an evil plan: he wanted to kill his girlfriend, then to kill himself, in order for the two of them to be bride and groom in heaven. (PRO TV, A 16 year-old girl was deadly stabbed by her former boyfriend, in front of the house. Her last words were "I love you, mommy", 11.10.2014)

> He said that it was hard without her, he was suffering a lot, he felt depressed, and I asked him to go to the psychologist with me. Four days ago she posted a song on Facebook that really confused him. I am very sorry for what is happening", says Amelia Nita the suspect's mother. (PRO TV, A 16 year-old girl was deadly stabbed by her former boyfriend, in front of the house. Her last words were "I love you, mommy", 11.10.2014)

Another case of murder committed by a 17-year-old teenager on the 16-year-old girl was the occasion of using several indirect techniques to reduce the responsibilities of the aggressor. This time, information on the status of the young man (young footballer of the local team), drinking alcohol, jealousy and depression generated by the loss of the girlfriend were put together in the article. The journalist uses an indirect technique of blaming the victim from the title of the article and says about the aggressor that he was ill: "The soccer player in Baia Sprie had benn conscious when she got her beloved 16-year-old strangled! The killer suffers from chronic alcoholism" (Spynews, 26.04.2015). The victim is reported to be responsible for committing intimate femicide. The journalist informs us that the victim "had left him for another boy", and for this reason he was drinking alcohol and had enter depression. Moreover, shortly before the murder, "she posted a song on Facebook, and drived him crazy."

> A footballer of only 17 is the main suspect in the case of a shocking murder that took place in the second day of Christmas in the town BaiaSprie. Eduard Vaida, the full-back of the Sporting Recea team, would have admitted in front of the police officers that he had killed his former girlfriend against a background of jealousy and alcohol consumption, writes *Sport News.* The quoted source contacted several members of the team that plays in the fourth division, who confessed that Vaida had missed the training sessions lately. "Eduard seemed more down beat ultimately. He didn't talk about his girlfriend with us, his colleagues, and lately he has missed several training sessions." (A 17 year-old footballer is

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the main suspect in the case of a shocking murder on Christmas Day, Ziare.com, 30.12.2014).

Conclusion

The analysis of data on intimate femicide cases selected for this study has shown that journalists are interested to include in the structure of articles especially information on the act of violence and less information on victims and aggressors or about the history of their relationship. These results confirm the information made in Romania, which analyzed the ways in which violence against women was publicized by the written press (Marinescu, Ştefănescu, 2004) or by the online media (Balica, 2017; Balica, 2016).

The analysis also highlighted the fact that Romanian journalists use the direct and indirect blame techniques of victims identified by Taylor. The exploratory nature of this study limited us to some general assessments regarding the way in which Romanian journalists represent intimate femicides. In any case, given the fact that in six out of ten selected articles (because they were the most publicized cases of intimate femicide between 2010 and 2015) we identified several direct and indirect techniques of victim's blame it is important for us to draw attention, once again, on the way in which the acts of fatal violence against women are mediatised. Extending investigations into how the Romanian media covers intimate femicide issues in a large number of cases (and implicitly a larger number of articles) could give us more arguments in favor of initiating a campaign for information and training of Romanian journalists. The fact that previous researches conducted in Romania on the media coverage of femicide-suicides and femicide revealed the presence of techniques for victimization and the reduction of the aggressors' responsibility (Balica, 2016; Balica, 2017) lead me to advocate the need for a journalists' awareness campaign on the consequences of the way in which the acts of lethal violence against women are mediatised. Furthermore, I believe that it is necessary to develop a good practice guide in the field of media coverage of violence against women as is aldready made in the USA, UK or Canada.

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